

# **Keeping the ACE flag flying: lessons from the history of adult and community education in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>1</sup>**

**Marion Bowl, Robert Tobias and Jennifer Leahy**

## **Introduction**

Adult and Community Education (ACE) policy and practice in Aotearoa have unfolded in the context of domestic and global historical, political and cultural developments (Tobias 1994, 2004). We begin this paper with a brief overview of that history, insofar as it is relevant to ACE's development. We examine changes in the fortunes of ACE from the idealism and reforms of the seventies, the setbacks and struggles of the eighties and nineties, to the fragile optimism of the past decade. We describe current threats to ACE from a government unsympathetic to the broader aims of adult education, a climate of financial restraint and the persistent dominance of neoliberal ideology. Finally we highlight lessons from the history of ACE which can help practitioners and academics steer a way forward in difficult times.

## **The historical context of ACE in Aotearoa**

Several writers (Tobias 1994, 2004; Te Hau 1972; Walker 1980, 1990) have traced educational history in Aotearoa from its pre-capitalist, pre-colonial roots. Before European settlement kinship-based Māori structures – whānau (family), hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe) – would pass on knowledge, understanding and skills. The Marae (meeting house) and Te Whare Wānanga (house of knowledge) were important for sharing spiritual and technical understanding, whilst kaumātua (elders) were repositories of knowledge and wisdom. Education was not bounded within discrete institutional structures.

Increasing European (Pākehā) settlement from the 1700s onwards brought technological and ideological change. Initially, the flow of knowledge was two way, but increasingly British colonisers imposed political and cultural dominance (Tobias 1994, 2004).

To create educational institutions on a British model was integral to British hegemony and incorporated New Zealand into the colonial political economy. But colonisation was not uncontested (Tobias 2004: 570), and today's structure and discourse of ACE in Aotearoa has been shaped by historical 'military, political, economic and ideological' struggles in which both Māori and Pākehā were protagonists. Increasing land alienation and encroachments on their sovereignty, for example, made Māori movements north and south seek a transformation of consciousness and a new sense of unity among iwi,

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) held at the University of Warwick, UK, 6-8 July, 2010

hāpu and whānau, through heke (marches) against illegal land occupation, and non-violent resistance to land confiscation (King, 2003, Walker, 1990).

The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi framed the legal relationship between Māori and Pākehā, established politically the bi-cultural status of Aotearoa New Zealand and implied a partnership in which the culture, skills and world view of both peoples were to be honoured. But the 1840s also saw wholesale appropriation of Māori land and, in spite of resistance, the erosion of Māori rights and autonomy in relation to education.

Educational and religious organisations were imported to cater for the needs of settlers. Mechanics' Institutes provided technical education and libraries for working men; Christian and temperance organisations aimed to tame the wilder side of settler life; the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) linked organised labour and the universities. Throughout the nineteenth century the state's role in adult education was negligible. But from the beginning of the twentieth it started to provide technical education and subsidise organisations such as the WEA.

The 1930s depression saw widespread cuts in state expenditure including adult education. However independent popular study groups also spread and working people engaged in industrial and political action and debate. The beginnings of economic recovery and the election of the 1935 Labour Government gave rise to a number of adult and community education initiatives and the restoration of funding to some ACE organisations. The world's first Council of Adult Education was established to co-ordinate, promote and advise. There was widespread discussion of education issues and forms of adult education were linked closely with community development. In 1939 the first of several Young Māori Leaders' Conferences was held, promoting debate on issues faced by Māori especially in view of rapid urbanisation (Walker 1980).

In 1939 the emphasis shifted to state provision to meet the requirements of a nation at war. However ACE initiatives were not lost and the post-war period saw an extension of the community centre movement and expansion of the work of the National Council of Adult Education. This established Regional Councils closely linked with universities in each region. In socially conservative 1950s and early 1960s Aotearoa Regional Councils and WEAs struggled to keep alive a liberal tradition of adult education, offering cultural development and social debate. But the main focus was the expansion of secondary education and the rapid and serendipitous rise of schools-based ACE.

### **Into the 1970's: idealism, optimism and change**

International and domestic factors in the late 1960's (Tobias 2004; Benseman 2005) ushered in a period of optimism about possibilities for adult education. Worldwide decolonisation stimulated radical thinking about the meaning and methods of education (Freire 1972; Illich 1973; Nyrere 1978) as Aotearoa's economic and political ties with Britain began to weaken. Global social movements – anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear, environmentalist, indigenous and feminist - during the late 1960s and 1970s gave practical meaning to learning through struggle (Foley 1999) outside state funding and

control. Growing world interest in lifelong education, sponsored through UNESCO and the OECD (Lengrand 1970; Faure 1972; Dave 1976) as a counterbalance to the emphasis on formal schooling, informed policy and practice (Tobias 2004; Benseman 2005). Under the 1972-1975 Labour government ACE gained momentum with the expansion of government supported adult education for non-vocational and social democratic ends. There was large-scale involvement in the 1974 Educational Development Conference and the first community colleges were inaugurated to raise the status of ACE and increase educational participation by adults.

Other 1970s initiatives included: adult literacy projects; Rural Education Activities Programmes (REAPs); direct funding of voluntary organisations and distance learning institutions; Learning Exchanges across the country; and movement-based education around peace, the environment, women's and Māori rights. Locke (1992) describes many informal ACE activities accompanying political action for peace. Boanas (1989) notes public education undertaken by peace groups, including Peace Squadron protests against visits to Aotearoa by nuclear-armed warships.

Walker (1980) points to the Māori renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s and the work of the Māori Women's Welfare League and Nga Tamatoa (the young warriors) in promoting the resurgence of Māori language. From the 1970s there was rapid growth in the teaching of Māori in schools and the community. The Kohanga Reo movement focused on children's Māori language learning, and in 1978 Ngoi Pewhairangi was appointed by the National Council of Adult Education to promote Māori language learning in the community. Her language classes were 'radically informal and community based' (Dakin 1988) rather than institutional. One consequence was Te Ataarangi, a national organisation for informal community-based learning of Māori.

The 1981 Springbok tour sparked a movement of protest, resistance and popular education. This involved thousands of people in marches and other protests everywhere games were held (Beyer 1981) and showed the power of popular education blossoming outside the state.

### **1980s and 1990s: struggles with neoliberalism**

1987 (Zepke 2001; Benseman 2005) marks the point at which, under a succession of governments, beginning with Labour, Aotearoa came under neoliberalising influences, advocating the rolling back of state involvement and reliance on the market to deliver public services, including education. This brought cuts in ACE funding. 'User pays' policies in education gained political ascendancy in UK and US, and were starkly apparent in Aotearoa. Benseman describes the effects on ACE: drastic funding cuts; removal of government advisory support; fall in membership of *ACE Aotearoa* (the national umbrella organisation); decline in morale and ACE activity.

Zepke (2001) suggests that from 1987, neoliberalism remade adult education in Aotearoa; the social democratic consensus on education as a public good was 'swept away in a tidal change'. But neoliberalism did not go uncontested. Though educational policy was based on consumerist ideology and managerialist solutions (Tobias 2004), a

small number of ACE practitioners kept the vision of a progressive future alive. Through the 1990s the national ACE organisation remained active; with little state funding or recognition it continued its annual conference and a community learning week, produced a national newsletter, maintained links with UNESCO and acted as a political lobby group.

Progressive forces outside government contested the assumptions of neoliberalism. Walker (1990) describes the 1984 Māori Educational Development Conference and its radical influence in advancing Māori education. Catherine Delahunty's (2001) speech to the ACE Aotearoa Annual Conference cites Freire (1972) and Newman (1994) in reference to 1980s struggles around Māori language education (Te Reo) and culture (tikanga) and the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti). She stresses the resilience of radical ideas and action in the face of neoliberal policy:

...the values of the veterans who began educational movements such as workers education, adult literacy, feminist analysis, Te Tiriti education, structural analysis, Te Reo and tikanga Māori education have not been destroyed. They have survived in communities and some institutions, like guerrillas in the jungle, moving swiftly through a once familiar landscape while Agent Orange aka 'user pays' defoliates the vegetation around them.

Whilst the history of ACE in the 1980s and 1990s may appear a story of defeat in policy terms, the continuity of progressive thought and action informed by radical education theory and practice stand out. Despite the ideological onslaught, deepening recession and high unemployment, public programmes to raise consciousness on many issues grew: in Christchurch alone, the number of courses increased substantially from 1983 to 1991 (Tobias and Henderson 1996, Tobias 2000). The momentum of debate and protest over economic and social policy changes grew slowly in the mid-1980s but increased in the late-1980s and early 1990s as the social price of neoliberal policies became clearer.

### **1999-2008: a fragile confidence**

Between 1999 and 2008 policy interest in ACE revived. The 1999 Labour Alliance government (Codd 2002; Olssen et al 2004; Zepke 2009) sought to reconcile neoliberal and social democracy and create a socialised market economy. The government established the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC): one early task was a review of post-compulsory education, including ACE.

The government acknowledged ACE both as a public and a private good and desired a collaborative approach to rebuilding the sector. An Adult Education and Community Learning Working Party was set up with representation from ACE practitioners in schools, universities and community organisations. It undertook consultations with the ACE sector and the result was *Koia! Koia! Towards a Learning Society* (TEC 2001) which defined ACE and outlined a vision for its future.

Central to this were: 'ownership' by the sector; greater coordination of provision; the implementation of 'quality' measures; and sector capability building through professional development. The carrot of funding encouraged the sector to work together through new regional networks to coordinate provision that met local needs, and implement quality systems and professional development plans. The 'stick' was the suggestion that only ACE organisations which attended regional network meetings would gain funding. But the imposition of regional networks caused resentment and confusion, especially where existing networks had long been independently cooperating as regional branches of *ACE Aotearoa*.

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), established by the Ministry of Education in 2003, had responsibility for policy and funding in the whole post-compulsory education sector. This, in theory, gave ACE equal standing alongside the larger and higher profile polytechnics, universities and industrial training organisations and undoubtedly raised its profile. Non-accredited education's place in tertiary education was publicly recognised. The government sought to advance skill related and remedial aims, to encourage lifelong learning and strengthen social and community life through education. Māori and Pasifika laid out their own ACE agenda based on self-determination, self-organisation and distinctive conceptions of knowledge, learning and teaching (Morrison and Vaiolēti 2008; Irwin 2008).

But increased, secure, equitable funding proved an illusion. The tendency towards instrumentalism in tertiary education did not really change, despite the promise that each tertiary partner had a 'distinctive contribution'. The government's aspirations to meet industry's needs through training, and link research to economic opportunities, improving workforce literacy and numeracy suggest a more instrumental approach than their post-election honeymoon promised.

There were gains and losses for the ACE sector. With clarity about their purpose and a sense of independence from government, regional networks might have been a gain had they not seemed imposed from above. But members of these networks were often confused about their function (Bowl 2007), and recruitment to pre-existing independent ACE Aotearoa branches fell. Surveillance and accountability (Tobias 2004, Zepke 2009) arguably undermined autonomous organisation among ACE practitioners. The test of the new networks would be their ability to protect ACE if faced with a threat to its existence as in the 1980s and 1990s.

## **2010: uncertain times**

A change of government, economic downturn and the dominance of neoliberalism signal renewed trouble for ACE in Aotearoa. In 2008 the Labour-led government fell and was replaced by a centre-right coalition led by the National Party. The new government radically cut staffing in the TEC and funding for ACE. Funding to schools-based adult education was slashed by 80%. Support for university- and polytechnic-based community education will also be axed by 50% from 2011. What the Minister of

Education referred to as 'hobby classes' (Tolley 2009) – general interest, non-accredited liberal education – have been particularly targeted.

School-based community educators have been among the most active networkers. So cuts in staffing and funding for them are a blow to ACE. Thus far regional ACE networks have been left intact (though diminished by the loss of practitioners). The TEC has been drastically reduced with a consequent reduction of support for regional networks and ACE sector capability.

The new government has unsettled the fragile certainties of the previous ten years. A spirited defence (Fordyce and Papa 2009) has not prevented cuts being implemented. This campaign was spearheaded by schools-based practitioners and other ACE community members, predominantly from Christchurch which has a history of organising and networking independently of government. Use of a website, Facebook and YouTube has enabled rapid information-sharing and organisation of protests adding new campaigning methods to the public meetings, national postcard campaign and political lobbying. A central message was how the government used the recession as cover to make cuts, to emphasise a 'user-pays' approach and to prioritise provision focused on literacy, numeracy and work skills.

Until recently, despite challenges in the 1980s and 1990s, there has been resistance to crude neoliberalism in adult education. The historical and cultural context once sustained a consensus around the social and cultural as well as individual and economic purposes of adult education. Consensus was underpinned by discourses of openness, equality and democracy and by struggles to maintain a broader educational vision. But this vision now appears as vulnerable as it did two decades ago. What can the lessons of the past offer us in our struggle for ACE's future?

### **Looking ahead: lessons from history**

Globally, education is being re-shaped in the wider context of neoliberalism. ACE emphasis on education for social, cultural and individual purposes, and its relative marginality compared with school and training-related education, is particularly susceptible to domestic political change. A historical analysis of the fortunes of ACE over forty years offers some pointers to the way forward in neoliberal times.

First, it seems clear that ACE is unlikely to survive in lone combat. Building alliances is essential to resistance. Past experience of ACE under attack highlights the need for a strong broadly-based regional and national organisation inclusive of learners and facilitators of learning. It illustrates the value of alliances with other progressive groups and organisations. Arguably, too great an emphasis on ACE as a 'sector' isolates it from possible allies in the wider educational field, in community development and in environmental and other progressive movements.

Second, our analysis of historical developments suggests that, even in difficult times, it is possible to maintain, or even gain ground. The struggles in the 1980s for Māori language education and against nuclear armament and Apartheid seem to demonstrate this, showing the need for autonomous organising, for clear demands and for the mobilisation of a broad cross-section of people.

A third lesson concerns the need to analyse how the state wields power over adult education by its control of recognition and funding. The pitfalls of engaging with government policy without a clear and critical understanding of potential implications are well illustrated by the counter-productive ambivalence over the ACE networks described above. It suggests the importance of a critical perspective and of clear shared values about the aims of adult education.

Fourth, it requires a rejection of *radical pessimism*, in favour of *radical hope* (Brookfield 2005). It entails a critical analysis of the assumption that the value of education can be reduced to its value as a commodity. This must be undertaken by adult educators and academics working together. However powerless academics may feel, they are in a privileged position to criticise educational and other structural inequalities (Kemmis 2006; RSPG 2008) in solidarity with adult education organisations and providers. Nothing is gained by the withdrawal of theorists, researchers or practitioners. A clear engagement in praxis, which includes a commitment to collective action, reflection and research (Coben 1998; Freire 1973, 1973) is vital if the ideals of ACE are to survive. Through critical praxis: 'informed, committed action' (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 190) adult education academics have much to teach and more to learn from community-based adult education.

## References

- Benseman, J. (2005) 'Paradigm lost: lifelong education in New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s' *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning* 33 (1): 6-20
- Beyer, A. (1981) *Being There* Paper presented at the NZARE Symposium: Education for Change, Hamilton
- Boanas, K. (1989). Peace education for adults in Aotearoa *Convergence*, 22(1), 39-46
- Bowl, M. (2007) *Adult and Community Education Networks and Professional Development* Christchurch, University of Canterbury
- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical* Lewes, Falmer
- Coben, D. (1988) *Radical Heroes: Gramsci, Freire and the Politics of Adult Education* New York, Garland
- Codd, J. (2002) 'The third way for tertiary education policy: TEAC and beyond' *New Zealand Annual Review of Education* 11: 31-57

Dakin, J. C. (1988). *Focus for Lifelong Learning: The National Council of Adult Education 1938-88*. Wellington, NZCER/NCAE

Dave, R.H. (ed.) (1976) *Foundations of Lifelong Education* Oxford, Pergamon/ UNESCO Institute for Education

Delahunty, C. (2001) 'Adult Education in Aotearoa: Crouching tiger or burnt-out dragon?' *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning* 29 (1): 78-83

Faure, E. (1972) *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* Paris, UNESCO

Foley, G. (1999) *Learning in Social Action* Leicester, NIACE

Fordyce, M. and Papa, M. (2009) Government Cuts to Adult and Community Education: A CLASS response *Journal of Adult Learning Aotearoa New Zealand* 37 (2): 6-9

Freire, P. (1972) *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Harmondsworth, Penguin

Freire, P. (1973) *Cultural Action for Freedom* New York, Seabury

Illich, I. (1973) *Deschooling Society* Harmondsworth, Penguin

Irwin, K. (2008) *ACE Professional Development Hui and Fono Evaluation Report* Auckland, Hope Brokers

Kemmis, S. (2006) Participatory Research and the Public Sphere *Educational Action Research* 14 (4): 459-476

King, M. (2003). *The Penguin History of New Zealand*. Auckland, Penguin Books

Lengrand, P. (1970) *An Introduction to Lifelong Learning* Paris, UNESCO

Locke, E. (1992) *Peace People: A History of Peace Activities in New Zealand*. Christchurch, Hazard Press

Morrison, S. And Vaoleti, T. (2008) *Ko Te Tangata* Hamilton, University of Waikato

Newman, M. (1994) *Defining the Enemy: Adult education in social action* Sydney, Stewart Victor

Nyerere, J. (1978) 'Development is for Man, by Man, and of Man' in Hall, B. and Kidd, J. (eds.) *Adult Learning: A design for action* Oxford, Pergamon

Olssen, M., Codd, J. and O'Neill, A. (2004) *Education Policy: Globalization, citizenship and democracy* London, Sage



Reclaiming Social Purpose Group (2008) *The Edinburgh Papers* Edinburgh, RSPG

Te Hau (1972) *Māori Adult Education: Report of a working party* Wellington, NCAE

TEC (2001) *Koia! Koia! Towards a Learning Society: The role of Adult and Community Education. Report of the Adult Education and Community Learning Working Party* Wellington, TEC

TEC (2007) *Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-12* Wellington, TEC

Tobias, R. (1994) *A History of Adult Learning and Education in Aotearoa New Zealand* University of Canterbury Centre for Continuing Education

Tobias, R. (2000). The boundaries of adult education for active citizenship - institutional and community contexts. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(5), 418-429

Tobias, R. (2002) 'Reflections on policy in adult education and community learning (ACE), with special reference to Koia! Koia! Towards a Learning Society *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning* 30 (1): 7-21

Tobias, R. (2004) 'Lifelong Learning Policies and Discourses: Reflections from Aotearoa New Zealand' *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 23 (6): 569-588

Tobias, R. M., & Henderson, J. (1996). Public issues and adult education. In J. Benseman, J. Findsen, B. & Scott, M. (eds.), *The Fourth Sector: Adult and community education in Aotearoa/New Zealand* :347-362 Palmerston North, Dunmore

Tolley, A. (2009) Minister of Education Aotearoa New Zealand (2009) *Budget 2009 and our direction for tertiary education* Letter to ACE Aotearoa 28<sup>th</sup> May

Walker, R. (1980) 'Maori Adult Education' in Boshier, R. (ed.) *Towards a Learning Society – New Zealand Adult Education in Transition* Vancouver, Learning Press

Walker, R. (1990) *Ka Whaiwhai Tonu Matou Struggle Without End* Auckland, Penguin

Zepke, N. (2001) 'In the net of economic rationalism: Adult education in Aotearoa New Zealand' *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning* 29 (2): 7-24

Zepke, N. (2009) 'A future for adult and lifelong education in Aotearoa New Zealand: Neoliberal or cosmopolitan?' *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 28 (6): 751-761